

The Selective Fossilization Hypothesis, Focus on Form, and the Second Language Classroom: Future Possibilities

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The questions of how and when (if at all) to treat the potentially fossilizable linguistic features in the second language (L2) classroom have occupied second language researchers and practitioners since Selinker (1972) brought the concept of *fossilization* to the fore.

Fossilization has been characterized as occurring when learning ceases prematurely even though the learner exhibits adequate motivation to learn, is exposed to abundant amounts of input, and has plentiful opportunities for practice (Han, 2004). As a result, learners often fail to reach target-level attainment, and the outcome of second language learning for many is incomplete and fragmentary (Schacter, 1990) when compared with that of first language acquisition. The phenomenon of fossilization, however, is not a global, system-wide cessation of learning, but is centered on specific linguistic targets. In her *Selective Fossilization Hypothesis*, Han (2009) offers researchers a powerful theoretical tool by which to uncover the ways in which fossilization occurs and why certain linguistic features are more prone to fossilization than others in a given population of learners. In devising a template to predict which features are more likely to become fossilized, Han (2009) examines the interaction between L1 markedness and L2 input robustness. Simply put, target structures that are robust in the L2 input and whose counterparts in the L1, if they exist, are more marked, fall within the acquisition zone. In contrast, target structures that are non-robust in L2 input and whose counterparts in the L1, if they exist, are less marked, fall within the fossilization zone (see Han, 2009 for a more detailed presentation). Given this framework, Han's model presents intriguing possibilities for instructed second language acquisition (SLA) research. In creating an inventory of potentially fossilizable features, SLA researchers could perhaps provide practitioners with an entree into the promising quest for more effective instructional methods to deal with fossilization in the L2 classroom.

A rich source of instructional options may lie in recent research in *focus on form* pedagogical research. The term "focus on form" was introduced by Long (1991) in order to promote an instructional approach in which the primary focus would always be on meaning, but where attention to form could be included if there is a communicative need for it. In his highly influential paper, Long observes a fundamental difference between pedagogical interventions that draw learners' attention to form within a meaningful context, which he labels "focus on form," and those that arise outside of a meaningful context, which he refers to as *focus on forms*. Later, Long and Robinson (1998) expand this definition to include a role for both teacher- and learner-initiated focus on form. Specifically, focus on form often involves an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features – by the teacher and/or one of the students – triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production.

In responding to these perceived problems in light of the Selective Fossilization Hypothesis, a host of pedagogical choices could potentially become available. For example, as L2 input robustness is a critical component of the Selective Fossilization Hypothesis, L2 instructors could vary the amount of modified input they provide, either through the instruction or corrective feedback they provide. Also, taking into consideration the markedness of a specific

feature in the students' L1, L2 instructors could "fine-tune" the way in which they approach a particular target structure, varying it to suit each particular classroom population.

To "fine-tune" their approach, instructors could potentially draw upon an inventory of focus on form pedagogical practices. In their outline of these practices, Doughty and Williams (1998) offer a continuum to highlight the degree of implicitness/explicitness involved in each activity. They position more obtrusive, rule-based, and overt strategies such as grammar consciousness-raising and the garden-path technique on the more explicit end of the continuum, and less obtrusive, exemplar-based, and incidental strategies such as input flood and input enhancement on the more implicit end of the continuum. In considering the appropriateness of which strategy to adopt vis-à-vis the selective fossilization hypothesis, a deeply considered look must be made at the particular features of the target language the teacher wants the student to learn, as well as the individual student's L1 and his/her learning environment.

Future research upon the selective fossilization hypothesis will not only need to examine its validity in diagnosing the potential fossilization of a given structure within a particular classroom population, but also necessitate a reexamination of strategies instructors can draw upon in each particular instance. An important part of this reexamination process is to determine if a feature falls within the acquisition zone, the fossilization zone, or in one of the other two zones. For some features, L1 markedness may be a major source of influence. However, for those target structures without a counterpart in the L1, L2 input robustness may play a greater role, meaning that students would likely benefit from carefully considered, focused instructed input. Taking these two factors – L1 markedness and L2 input robustness – into account, second language researchers and, by extension, instructors can tailor the level of explicitness or implicitness each activity requires to a given L2 population. Only by this "fine-tuning" process of choosing the appropriate pedagogical response will a proper fit between the individual learner and the target structure be realized. Obviously, a number of challenges await those who conduct such classroom-based research. Nevertheless, the Selective Fossilization Hypothesis will provide both second language researchers and teachers with much food for thought in the years to come.

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